

Viewing The Peace Proposals

A Central Intelligence Agency evaluation of the latest Viet Cong peace proposal draws some obvious conclusions as to motivation without getting to the real heart of the matter. The CIA reported to President Nixon shortly after the Viet Cong delegate to the Paris peace talks, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, submitted her proposals; these were later clarified by the senior Communist strategist, Le Duc Tho.

The CIA took the position that the proposals were aimed at "making things awkward" for the United States at home and abroad and at encouraging opponents of South Vietnamese President Thieu, who is standing for re-election in October.

All this may well be true, but the CIA also noted that there were new "nuances" in the proposals, and a more positive approach might have been to concentrate on the new angles with the idea that they would be explored by proper Administration officials.

Mrs. Binh's plan constitutes on the whole a reasonable formula for a Vietnam settlement, and we see no reason why it should not be used as a basis for negotiation. While implementation might embarrass the United States, the fact is that no plan fair to all of Vietnam could fail to embarrass Washington. Indeed, a major United States objective now is not so much to

avoid embarrassment as to avoid the mark of outright defeat.

In the context of the peace proposals a statement made by President Nixon last Tuesday may be significant. The President said that all Americans would be withdrawn from Vietnam consistent with two objectives, the release of the prisoners of war and "secondly, in a way that will contribute to a permanent and lasting peace, we hope, in Southeast Asia . . ." The Administration's second condition has only recently been that the Saigon regime should have a "chance" to survive.

Does this mean that Saigon's survival is no longer a condition? The Viet Cong plan meets the first condition, release of all prisoners by Dec. 31 if all American troops are withdrawn by that date. The one-time Viet Cong insistence on a coalition government in Saigon was altered in such a way as to indicate that the point, at least as to timing, is open for bargaining.

What all this may suggest is that both Washington and the Communist leaders in Vietnam are moving toward a compromise. We hope so. The CIA report was presumably "leaked" for a purpose. The negotiators in Paris seem to be feeling their way toward back-stage meetings, if indeed such contacts have not been taking place (in Paris or elsewhere). It is very tentative, but real progress could be just ahead.